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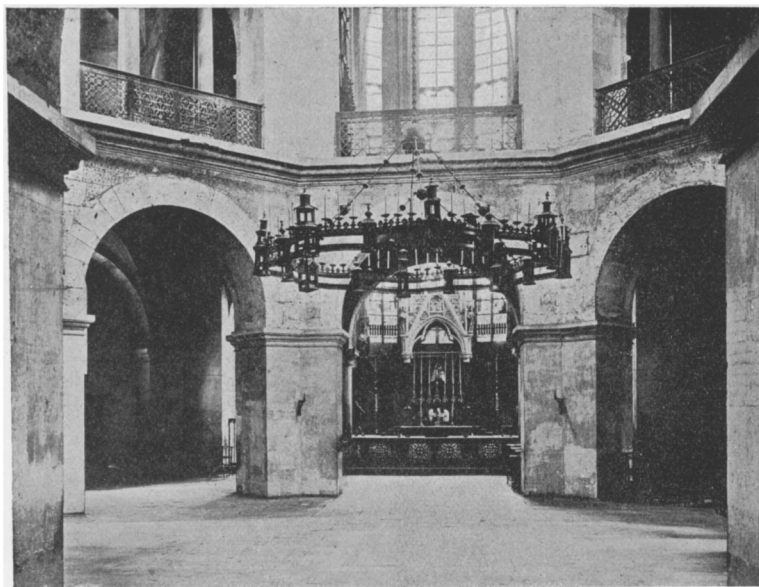
## THE INTAGLIOS OF THE CORONA LUCIS AT AIX-LA-CHAPELLE



*The Adoration of the Magi*

*Print taken, 1863, from an intaglio on copper executed at Aix-la-Chapelle, 1165-70*

Purchased, 1921



*The Corona Lucis as it now appears*

### The Intaglios of the Corona Lucis in the Cathedral at Aix-la-Chapelle

*Engravings before Engraving*

THE Print Department of the Museum has become the fortunate possessor of a set of ink impressions from sixteen intaglios upon copper, executed between the years 1165 and 1170 in the region of the lower Rhine. At that date printing was still for Europe an art of the far future. The plates were engraved, not as designs to be manifolded, but as decorations for a great votive chandelier — *Corona Lucis*, or Crown of Light, in the phrase of the Church — which still occupies the place in the Cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle, for which it was wrought nearly eight hundred years ago. About the middle of the last century the Corona was taken down for cleaning and repair, and some one in charge, doubtless charmed by the intaglios and reluctant to see them returned to comparative oblivion above men's heads in a dim cathedral vault, had the happy thought to use them in the interim for printing a limited number of sets after the manner of the modern engraver. A few years afterward Dr. Fr. Bock, Honorary Canon of the Cathedral, had other impressions made for a monograph which he devoted to the Corona.\* Sets of these engravings before engraving are preserved in the British Museum, in Berlin and elsewhere; and one of those from Dr. Bock's book has just been acquired by the Museum. Strange as the new

use of his intaglios might appear to the twelfth century metal-worker, he would doubtless be pleased that they can now, by proxy at least, meet other eyes than those of worshippers, or even than the All-seeing Eye whose blessing upon his work was its chief reward.

The place, the occasion and the persons for which the Corona Lucis of Aix was made were all of exceptional historical importance. The place was the tomb of Charlemagne within the Cathedral founded by him; the occasion was supposedly a solemn exposition of his ashes; and the persons, his Hohenstaufen successor, Frederick I, Barbarossa, styled in an inscription upon the Corona "*Caesar Catholicus Romanorum Fredericus*," and the Empress Beatrix.

The inscription relates that the Corona was intended as a symbol of the celestial city — the city that "had no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine upon it," "having the glory of God." The Heavenly Jerusalem was to be set forth under the chosen semblance: "*Celica Jherusalem signatur imagine tali*." The custom had grown up during previous centuries of suspending a cross over the high altar of churches and above it a crown in which candles were fixed as in similar circular bands of metal in churches to-day. One of these ancient coronae still hanging in the Cathedral at Hildesheim in Germany, and dating from a century before the Corona at Aix, represents the twelve gates of the heavenly city upon the copper band conceived as walls. These twelve gates the larger Corona at Aix, thirteen feet in diameter, transformed into tower gates and supplemented with four corner towers, as shown in the illustration at the head of this article. In the towers lamps were placed, and on the edge of the frame, representing walls, forty-eight candles.

\* "Der Kronleuchter Kaisers Friedrich Barbarossa im Karolingischen Muenster zu Aachen," Dr. Fr. Bock, Ehren-Stiftsherr, etc. Aachen, 1863, folio. Ten years before, M. Ch. Cahier had made the Corona the subject of a learned, entertaining, and instructive study containing engravings of all the intaglios: "Couronne de Lumiere d'Aix la Chapelle et monuments analogues du Moyen Age," in "Mélanges d'Archéologie," Ch. Cahier and A. Martin, Vol. III, pp. 1-62; Planches I-XII. Paris, 1853.



*The Annunciation*  
Prints from intaglios



*The Nativity*  
Aix-la-Chapelle, A. D. 1165-70

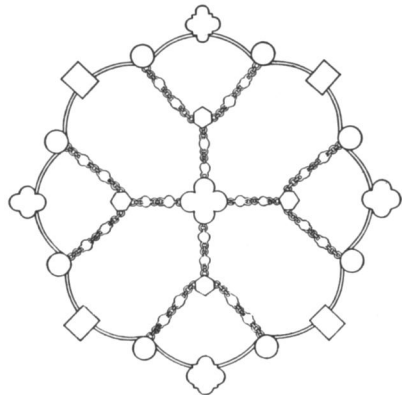
With its many lamps and candles and its shining and varied surfaces, the Corona lighted must have been a brilliant sight, and to the people of the twelfth century an overwhelming luxury of illumination, truly imaging the city of light. The Cathedral records show that the Corona at Aix was used for the illumination of the church at festivals. In bequests received for services on other anniversaries it was sometimes specified "the Corona shall be lighted." It witnessed, and doubtless also helped to make brilliant, the coronation of the emperors at Aix during seven hundred years.

The form of the Corona contains another symbolism. If we join the central point of its plan, representing the chain of suspension, with other branching chains directed first to the corners of the squares, a figure appears like a flower of four petals with four others partly showing between them, as appears in the accompanying illustration. For reasons deep hidden in the heart of mediæval Christianity heaven was often thought of under the aspect of a rose. A century and a half later the assembly of the Blessed was to be called a rose in the "Divina Commedia," its golden center the throne of Divinity itself; and Orcagna was to depict the fancy on the walls of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Here in the Corona at Aix the idea is at its inception and blends the suave suggestions of a descending flower with the majesty of gleaming towers and walls.

Resolved to make every part of the Corona beautiful and eloquent, the cunning workmen of the masterpiece filled with intaglio designs even the bases of the towers, although their work could be seen only with difficulty by looking directly upward from the floor below. Upon eight were depicted episodes of the life which was itself the Way to the Celestial City imaged above, and upon the other eight the blessings of the Master upon those who truly follow Him. The plates bearing the Beatitudes consist of gratings, perhaps to let light through from the lamps and candles

above, and upon each is represented an angelic figure holding a scroll with the first few words of the Latin text.

The personages in the best of these designs are well-favored, well-built beings with comely hands and feet and rounded and expressive features. Of the frowns and angularity of the Byzantine mosaics there is no trace, nor of the Burne-Jones-like emaciation or Beardsley-like longitude that even the glass-workers of the time still felt the necessary mark of sacred quality. Their mien and their movements simply and intimately reveal the familiar



*The Rose plan of the Corona*

wonders they depict. The Virgin of the Annunciation bends a girlish head and raises graceful hands as she shrinks before the message of the angel. His features are delicately differentiated from hers; he is still moving, with wings just closing. As he stands and gazes, so might any noble young herald of solemn and joyful tidings have stood and gazed in the streets of Aix-la-Chapelle.

In the scene of the Nativity Mary is already Madonna, a woman mature, serene and conscious of the dignity vouchsafed her. In her look one reads the words of the Magnificat. The Junonian



*The Blessing on those that Mourn*  
 Print from an intaglio Aix-la-Chapelle, A. D. 1165-70

conception of the Madonna, queenly in feature and pose, which was first wrought in stone in Pisa just a century afterward, is already dawning far away in this minute and almost furtive fashion.

Mary becomes fully the queen in the scene of the Adoration, holding up her own hand in salutation to the kneeling kings while the Child blesses them. The veiled hand of the first king represents an ancient tradition of Eastern Christianity, doubtless with ceremonial significance. The tradition reappears elsewhere in the intaglios. In both this scene and the preceding the tumbled hair of the Infant contrasts with the impeccably and even decoratively disposed locks of His mother and her visitors. In what region, one wonders, did the unknown engraver of this episode find models for the élite of earth that he has represented here?

The piercing of the fields upon which the Beatitudes were to be displayed made the designer's task of necessity chiefly one of ornamentation. The opportunity before him was to vary the pattern formed by the interlacing bars and the decoration with which they were covered. The single figure holding the scroll with its abbreviated Latin text played an ideal rôle and is conceived in statuesque fashion on a large scale. For the most part it appears the work of a less skillful hand. In three plates only the pattern of the bars is varied from the rectangular network of all the others, and since these three alone show groups of attendant figures — either hearers of the Word or those upon whom its blessing rests — we are tempted to infer

that the designer was the artist of the chief scenes of Christ's earthly life. The most complex design is perhaps that of the Blessing on the Meek, where, by a naive fancy, one of the hearers hesitatingly grasps the edge of the Angel's mandorla; the most boldly graceful is perhaps that of the Blessing on the Seekers after Righteousness. The most deeply felt design is perhaps that of the Blessing on those that Mourn. These angels have almost the air of figures by Ghiberti, and the varied attitudes, features, and drapery of the clustered groups appear the sign manual of an independent and intelligent craftsman.

The Romanesque fondness for luxurious interlacing patterns of the most varied kinds, which was to sober down through the coming Gothic age into the development of a single germinal idea — that of the pointed arch — is given full play in the ornamental borders of all the fields and over the bars of the squares and quatrefoils. The designer repeats himself comparatively little, and the flowing lines he traces are sometimes of consummate grace. The Romanesque artists inherited their freedom of formal imagination among other gifts from Byzance. Their ornament has a barbaric richness that betokens the amateur, the man of many ideas imperfectly carried out; but though we may find their successors more finished artists, there is a spirit of spendthrift youth in the work of the Romanesque decorators that stirs the mind by its promise while charming the eye by its performance.

GILMAN.